



Protecting Youth Who Run Away to Escape Abuse

As an OHIO YAB Youth Ambassador, I have been reaching out to Ohio legislators to develop safeguards to support youth who run away to escape abuse. I want these young people (a.) not to be charged with a status offense for running away, (b.) not to be sent to detention, (c.) to be entrusted to children services and have their allegation of being abused be thoroughly investigated.

My name is Jaylin Hart, and I want to share part of my story, and how it intersects with running away to escape abuse. I've been in and out of foster care for 17 years of my life. My case file started when I was one month old and my mother left me and my twin sister.

Over and over, they kept sending me back to my biological family. Over and over, my case file has the word: "unsubstantiated." If you have never been abused and then had others refuse to believe you, then you don't know what I experienced.

One time when I ran away from my biological home to escape being abused, I literally walked 10 miles to my local children services agency. When I got there, I was arrested and charged with being unruly. That didn't make any sense to me. I was basically being punished for trying to seek safety.

Today, I dedicate my time and efforts to make a difference for foster youth. I am the President of the VISION Board in Montgomery County. I facilitated a youth workshop during the 2024 Leadership and Life Skills Summit and helped facilitate youth activities during the National Independent Living Conference in Orlando, Florida.

I'm preparing to enter the Army, and pursue college, first at Sinclair, and then at the University of Dayton. Majors of interest to me include social work, criminal justice and political science. The voices of youth matter – and their safety matters. When they run away, they do so for a reason, and adults need to ask why and listen to their answers.

The LSC wording as designed by Ohio foster youth includes three important provisions to better safeguard youth who experience abuse, and run away to try to escape it:

1. **Proposed change to the Unruly Child Definition (ORC 2151.022):** Youth would not be considered “unruly” or “wayward” solely based on running away.
2. **Proposed change to the procedures when Taking a Child into Custody (ORC 2151.31):** Youth who run away to escape abuse would be taken to children services, rather than a juvenile detention center.
3. **Proposed change to the Procedures After Taking Child into Custody (ORC 2151.311):** The current default is to send the child or teen back to the custodial placement they ran away from.

The wording as designed by youth would change this so that **if the person taking the child into custody has a reasonable suspicion that the release of the child to the child's parents, guardian, or other custodian would subject the child to abuse, they would take the child or teen to children services instead.**